1:McIlwraith, E-5 (1922-1924)1948
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THE WASH-BASIN

A third supernatural element which must be in good condition if a Bella Coola is to prosper in life, is a *nusḵelusta*, wash-basin. In the land above, *Ălquntăm* has a large one filled with water which, having been constructed by himself, is replete with power. When a child is born, a small part of this receptacle, with its contents, is reserved for him; the supernatural artisans choose the actual section, but it is *Ălquntăm* who gives them the ability to do so. A fortunate man, whose ventures are successful and to whom goods are attracted, is said to have a good wash-basin; whereas the ill-luck of an unfortunate person is attributed, among other reasons, to the small size of his supernatural vessel. The Bella Coola have no clear ideas about the connection between an individual and his wash-basin. Some state that it remains in the land above; others believe that its intangible essence comes to a child at birth and grows up with him, always near his body, as if it were the offspring of the basin in the land above. As long as it remains in motion the owner continues in good health and prosperity, but if it becomes sluggish he falls ill. Long ago, shamans knew how to reanimate a wash-basin, but since the time of the first people, when supernatural ability was common, this has been a lost art. Senile decay is attributed to listlessness of this possession.

River water, being a creation of *Ălquntăm*, is akin to the water in his basin above. Boys are always advised to bathe in the river at dawn; the act is termed *ăsḵelusam*, a word connected with *nusḵelusta*. A prayer is uttered while washing. The combination of verbal appeal and the application of water strengthens the petitioner's wash-basin and so increases his chances for prosperity. Until a few years ago, this practice was almost universal. Water is always considered a strange substance, obviously a supernatural creation, and believed to be the chief means of sustenance for a child after being weaned.[50]

[50] This may be a mere rationalization.

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the perils of infancy. During this period, the mother observes various magical taboos to ensure the welfare of her offspring, and endeavours to strengthen herself by rubbing her own body with non-odoriferous oils obtained from dog-fish, geese, or fresh olachen. Soft pounded salmon and water are added to an infant's diet as soon as possible, though nourishment from the breast frequently continues until a child is two, or even three years of age. It is not uncommon to delay weaning until the mother is again pregnant, when the child is deterred by the application of soot to the breasts. Marital relations are recommenced as soon as the mother is strong enough; there is no specified period of abstinence, nor does it matter whether or not the woman is lactative.

Occasionally, an infant is born with teeth; such an one is thought to be the reincarnation of a dead ancestor, though no one knows which. A similar belief is held respecting a child with dimples in the lobes of its ears; these are regarded as remnants of the holes pierced for ear-rings. A child that cries in the womb is said to have great intellect.

In former times infanticide was practised for various reasons. If a woman died in giving birth, it was customary for her mother to kill the child unless one of her relatives was able to suckle the motherless infant who was then given to her. It was not unknown for the mother of a large family to ask the midwife to kill the child in order to avoid an addition to her responsibilities. An unmarried girl who became pregnant often went alone to the forest, delivered herself without assistance, and killed her infant. This was considered to be the kindest act, since an illegitimate child was said to be, "Like a Dog." In some cases the prospective mother requested a friend to cause abortion by kneading the stomach and uterus, a method said to be effective and seldom fatal. How to do so is common knowledge, but to practise it is considered disgraceful, and the term *ixwotl*, applied to such an one, is among the most foul of Bella Coola opprobriums. It is believed that a woman who has had several children can in some way prevent